
Autonomy is a concept that has seen a rapid rise to prominence in broad (and often conflictive) inter- and intra-Marxist and anarchist debates on political praxis over the last decades. From its early heyday in the 1970s around *operaismo* tendencies of 1970s Italian Marxism, the French *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and the work of scholars such as Murray Bookchin and Harry Cleaver, to its latest manifestation where the social movements of Latin America are often the starting point, most notably in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, John Holloway, Marina Sitrin, and Ana Dinerstein herself, it is an idea that has evolved and transformed in a manner reflective of the political praxis with which it associates.

It is here, as a major participant in these processes of developing autonomy as a political and conceptual tool, that Dinerstein’s contribution in *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America* makes its mark. Surveying the impressively wide and diverse range of literature on autonomy and combining it with an array of philosophical and sociological contributions from Latin America, this work identifies an oft-cited lacuna in autonomist thinking as its starting point: the question of confronting power. Dinerstein correctly notes that many of the debates on the utility (or futility) of autonomist thought and political organisation have asked how it can deal with the repressive and coercive forces that can (and oftentimes are) mobilised by capital and the state. Taking Latin America as a point of reference, this question has become even more pressing as progressive governments from Argentina and Brazil to Venezuela and Bolivia, which emerged in response to many of the resurgent autonomist social movements that are the subject of this work, have come under increasing pressure from a resurgent Right.
Dinerstein makes two major contributions to which I will draw attention and around which I will continue this review: (1) systematising autonomy and specifying it as socio-political praxis by critically surveying a vast literature and mobilising the concept through Ernst Bloch’s notion of “hope” to identify four key moments for political action and social change (negation, creation, contradiction [conflict], and excess); and (2) bringing indigenous interpretations of autonomy to the fore and reversing the typical view that Latin America should learn from the world, stating that the world should be learning from Latin America.

Through a systematic engagement with Bloch’s notion of “hope”, framed as an understanding of autonomy in “the key of hope”, Dinerstein defines autonomy as characterised by negation, creation, contradiction, and excess. Each of these reinforces the other, bringing about a fragile, fluctuating but powerful means of challenging and constructing an alternative future. In her presentation, negation is the denial of the existing present–or at least of those features that reproduce the logic of power. Creation is the pursuit of “concrete utopia”, a prefigured new reality run through with contradictions derived from the inherent fragility of the alternative that is understandable only through the contradictions and conflicts with which it is faced. Finally, excess is a vital feature that demonstrates the ability of this praxis to, both really and potentially, transcend the attempts to appropriate and subsume this collective, alternative form of organisation through its valorisation.

It is these mutually complementary processes, in turn, that enable it to be prefigurative in the sense that it pushes beyond the limitations of the already existing and into the potential of future human praxis against and beyond capital. Importantly, it is this search for the future (what she refers to as the “not yet”) that is central to making the concrete “real”. The persistence of power, in Dinerstein’s view, can only be understood as one part of the lived reality, with the drive to develop the unknown future against the mediation and appropriation exercised over this autonomous praxis existing in constant struggle with the
prevailing practices and mediations of the present, which includes the coercive capabilities of the state.

Adding the complementary philosophy of Bloch enables a deeper understanding of the practice of “organising hope”—this collective autonomous pursuit of the “not yet”—inasmuch as Dinerstein can frame these four attributes of autonomy via the “unfinished” nature of reality, the constant anthropological (not ideological) human striving beyond the perceived lack, the contingency and “danger” of that struggle, and the key productive and creative excess in forming the “not yet”. This is a vital starting point for understanding the question of autonomy confronting (and existing alongside) power by bringing potentially constructive, rather than simply disruptive, practice to the fore. It enables an understanding of the competing constituent features of the “real” in which the contradictory practices of struggling to overcome power and ongoing efforts to appropriate and repress that struggle are fundamental features of the existent concrete reality.

It is from these foundations that this work makes a truly significant contribution not just to academic thinking on the subject of autonomy, but to the potential of making it—of operationalising it—in practice. Crucially, this aspect of Dinerstein’s contribution is developed in direct conversation with concrete, really existing experiences of autonomy, with all the tension, contradictions, and limitations that characterise its unstable and, in the language she takes from Bloch, “disappointable” forms. The extent of this intervention should not be underestimated. By mobilising the four mutually constitutive phases of autonomy—negation, creation, contradiction, and excess—through four separate and distinctive experiences of autonomous organising, the tension between its general and specific forms is played out in full view of the reader. Consequently, the means to reproduce and to learn from these experiences, from the opportunities they create and the limitations they face is brought to the forefront of the analysis in a creative and original manner.
Moreover, the lessons to be learned from these experiences and from the means by which they are framed in the “key of hope” ask us to consider Latin America as invaluable to autonomous practice outside the region. Latin America has been long held-up as a place whose political economy had to be informed by the competing ideologies of Europe, North America, and Asia, where political strategies from Popular Fronts in the 1930s to Maoist guerrillas in the 1960s have coexisted alongside social democratic “Third Way” governments, Keynesian or “developmental state” inspired state strategies of class compromise, and repressive IMF-imposed neoliberalism. Yet the region has a remarkably innovative tradition of political and economic thinking that includes structuralist and dependency theorists from Raul Prebisch to José Carlos Mariátegui, statist models of social revolution under leaders including Salvador Allende and Hugo Chávez, and the diverse array of social movements from the Zapatistas, the the unemployed workers movement and worker-recovered companies in Argentina, indigenous movements in Bolivia, and landless workers’ movements in Brazil, through which Dinerstein illustrates and informs her unique claims about autonomy.

Importantly, she brings to our attention the significance of indigenous social and political practices as foundational of a unique regional and global contribution to theorising about and acting through autonomy. It is this understanding of the unique formulation of indigenous “cosmologies” in the constitution of autonomy, most notably in the case of the Mexican Zapatistas and the Bolivian indigenous social movements, that marks out one of Dinerstein’s most innovative claims. Vital to envisioning the prefigurative nature of autonomy is locating this notion she takes from Bloch of the “not yet”. In this sense, autonomous praxis contains, in part, activities that are untranslatable—they are activities that are not amenable to appropriation or valorisation, persisting in a manner that places them in continual contradiction but also in possession of the potential to go beyond and against. Seizing upon and defending these untranslatable forms mobilised in the reconstruction of
hope first by the Zapatistas and, later, in Bolivia offers a crucial means by which to consider the “untranslatable” in everyday practice and political resistance beyond these communities.

As with the evolution and transformation of this field, the challenges raised within this text reflect the challenges faced by autonomous political praxis throughout the world. The pressing task of confronting power, of avoiding appropriation into existing political agendas on the traditional Left and resurgent Right, of resisting the processes of appropriation and valorisation that subsume the fragile, disappointable hope, and of preventing the reconstruction, via this appropriation and subsumption, of what Dinerstein aptly names the “hopelessness” of neoliberalism remains paramount and dependent on the futures that can be envisaged. The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America offers an invaluable starting point for thinking about these challenges and for confronting the limitations of fatalist critiques or naïve optimism that too often pervade debates on autonomy. More than that, it offers an open blueprint for thinking about and acting upon the idea that, within a concrete reality that continues to be overwritten by the hopelessness of neoliberalism, the seeds of hope still remain.

Adam Fishwick
Department of Politics & Public Policy
De Montfort University
adam.fishwick@dmu.ac.uk

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